

## **ASSAILING THE GROUND OF ONENESS (7): THE IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS OF A GENUINE LOCAL CHURCH AND THE FORBIDDEN GROUNDS OF DIVISION ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE**

The New Testament presents the church as universally one in its existence and locally one in its manifestation (Eph. 1:22-23; Acts 13:1). Yet Christians today are divided among a plethora of denominations and local sects. Underlying these divisions are innumerable grounds advanced to justify their existence and separation from other Christians. Understandably, this has led to much confusion regarding the scriptural basis for identifying a genuine church. This article seeks to set forth six tests of a genuine local church and seven forbidden factors of division based upon the testimony of Scripture.

### **Six tests of a genuine local church**

1. *Having no particular name.* Christian sects are referred to as “denominations” because they have been denominated by taking a particular name. To take a particular name for a group of Christians is to constitute that group a sect, a denomination. This serves to separate that group of Christians from Christians in general. Taking another name apart from the Lord’s name is a serious matter. As Christians we have believed into the Lord’s name (John 3:16, footnote 2), been baptized into the Lord’s name (Gal. 3:27), and are called to meet together in the Lord’s name (Matt. 18:20, footnote 2). In Revelation 3:8 the Lord praised the church in Philadelphia because the church did not deny His name. We have been purchased by the Lord and are betrothed to Him as His bride (2 Cor. 11:2). To take a name apart from the Lord’s name is to deny our position before the Lord and to declare its insufficiency.

2. *Having no particular fellowship.* As regenerated believers, we have been called into the fellowship of the Son of God (1 Cor. 1:9). This fellowship is the common participation in Christ of all regenerated believers and includes the fellowship of the apostles (Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:3). Any fellowship of believers which is special and particular, not the inclusive, common fellowship of the apostles and of the Son of God, constitutes a division.

3. *Having no particular teaching.* A particular teaching is a teaching that is insisted upon as a basis for fellowship among believers. Stressing particular teachings such as baptism by immersion, tongue-speaking, Sabbath-keeping, and the significance of the bread and cup at the Lord’s table, produce particular fellowships and result in divisions.

4. *Having universal fellowship, not isolated fellowship.* Every local church must participate in the universal fellowship of the Body of Christ with every other genuine local church. If a Christian group takes the position that they receive all Christians but does not have fellowship with all other genuine churches, that is a local sect, not a local church. Their fellowship is limited, isolated, and not the universal fellowship of the Body of Christ.

5. *Having no separate administration.* A Christian group that meets the preceding four items may still insist on having their own administration, a separate eldership. The unique pattern of Scripture is that there was one eldership for one church and one eldership for one city (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Even though the church in Jerusalem had thousands of believers meeting together, still there was only one eldership, one administration for the church (Acts 21:20).

6. *Having no hidden connections with other organizations.* Some Christians meet in congregations affiliated with mission boards. Other Christian groups are part of a federation of churches. There is no basis in Scripture for any supralocal organization to which local churches belong or are accountable.

From the above points it is clear that not all so-called “churches” are genuine local churches according to the New Testament. While all Christians are part of the church spiritually, not all Christians meet as the church practically. The ground of the church is not a matter of numbers or of condition, but altogether a matter of standing. While a group of believers may be poor in their condition (consider the church in Corinth), it is altogether proper according to its standing (“the church of God in Corinth,” 1 Cor. 1:2). The condition of a church is relative and may change from time to time; however, the ground of the church is absolute and does not fluctuate. Hence, the determination of the genuineness of a local church should never be dependent upon its apparent condition, but only upon its standing.

## Seven forbidden grounds of division

1. *Spiritual leaders.* In writing to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul strongly addressed the tendency of believers to designate themselves as followers of particular spiritual leaders in order to differentiate themselves from others: "Now I mean this, that each of you says, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ" (1 Cor. 1:12). While much benefit may be derived from the spiritual leaders among the churches, Scripture provides no basis to divide the church according to the person whom we admire.

2. *Instruments of salvation.* It is common among believers to ascribe one's spiritual origin to those through whom one has come to know salvation. Unguarded, this appreciation may engender a sense of belonging to the one through whom salvation was received and lead to sectarianism. On account of this Paul corrected the Corinthians who said, "I am of Paul," and others who said, "I am of Apollos."

3. *Non-sectarianism.* Some in Corinth said "I am of Christ" to differentiate themselves from others they considered as sectarian for saying "I am of Paul," or "I am of Cephas." Actually, those who said "I am of Christ" were also condemned by Paul as being sectarian. It is not wrong for believers to declare that they belong only to Christ; neither is it wrong to repudiate the sectarian standings of others. So long as our saying that "I am of Christ" refers merely to whom we belong, it is acceptable. But if it implies that you are sectarian and I am not sectarian, we err. Concerning this Watchman Nee observed:

When you say, "I am of Christ," do you mean to say others are not? It is perfectly legitimate for you to say, "I am of Christ," if your remark merely implies to whom you belong; but if it implies, "I am not sectarian; I stand quite differently from you sectarians," then it is making a difference between you and other Christians. The very thought of *distinguishing* between the children of God has its springs in the carnal nature of man, and is sectarian. If we look on other believers as sectarian and consider ourselves to be non-sectarian, we are immediately differentiating between God's people and thereby manifesting a divisive spirit even in the very act of condemning division. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee [CWWN], vol. 51: Church Affairs, p. 85; italics in original*)

4. *Doctrinal differences.* Local churches according to the pattern of the New Testament are differentiated only according to their respective localities and not according to any emphasis on any doctrine outside the common faith (Jude 3). All genuine local churches are produced by and follow the apostles' teaching, which is the same in every church (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 4:17).

5. *Racial differences.* Historically, race has been a most pernicious stumbling block to unbelievers and believers alike. However, in the church race has no place. All distinctions according to the natural man have been done away with in Christ. "For also in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and were all given to drink one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13).

6. *National differences.* Just as there are no racial distinctions in the Body of Christ, neither are there national distinctions, for in the church of God there are neither "Jews nor Greeks" (v. 13).

7. *Social distinctions.* The social distinctions that exist in fallen human society have no place in the church. Paul's writings are clear, in the church as the new man "there cannot be...slave, free man..." (Col. 3:11).

From the above points we have seen both the positive bases upon which the church is manifested as local churches, and we have seen the negative bases upon which the church should not be divided. The Scriptures present no basis for establishing churches except according to the principle of the one Body being expressed as one local church in a city. As Watchman Nee observed:

To leave a sect is justifiable, but to leave a church—whether on account of unspirituality, wrong doctrine, or bad organization—is utterly unjustifiable. If you leave the local church and form a separate assembly, you may have greater spirituality, purer teaching, and better government; but *you have no church; you only have a sect*" (CWWN, vol. 51: Church Affairs, p. 96; italics in original).